

## Social Prejudice & Caste Politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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### Abstract

The superfluous and malice behavior summoned out to the untouchables in India has been an issue of enormous concern. They have been undergoing the inexorable humiliation at the hands of the so called higher classes of Indian society. Concurrence of political independence has not improved their social status. Untouchables, referred as scheduled caste have been assigned the name "Harijan" by the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi. Now a day's these groups refer to themselves as Dalits which means exploited or underprivileged. Arundhati Roy, a social activist has bequeathed the problem of untouchability pervading the Indian society in her booker winner novel, *The God of Small Things*. Her novel explores the caste system, gender difference and the police-politician relation that have existence in the country even after virtually six decades of independence. The novel discloses the cavernous gap between the touchables and the untouchables; the exploiters and the exploited, and the powerful and the powerless. It is all about how the human values of the children, youth, women and the untouchable have been impinged upon, and how they have been deceived. Here in this paper, I will discuss the maltreatment convened out to Velutha, one of the characters in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and how the idea of social prejudice is explored in the novel?

**Keywords:** Untouchables, Prejudice, Maltreatment

### Introduction

The crucial endeavor of any legitimate literature is truth telling. Indian Dalit writing is a post-independence literary paradox. Evolution of Dalit literature has a great historical connotation in India. It is essentially literature of turmoil against the fossilized caste-system. Protest against the conventional

unreasonable social order and denunciation of the intact hegemonic tradition done blatantly or clandestinely, was the foremost plunge of the modern Dalit literature in preliminary stages. Dalit literatures are not only a literature of dissent and repudiation, but also a literature of re-enactment of the past.

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* the untouchable is defined as "a member of the lowest-caste Hindu group or a person outside the caste system, contact with whom is traditionally held to defile members of higher castes." Before I advance, it would not be a bad initiative to have a glance at the word 'Caste'. According to *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* the 'Caste' is defined as "Caste is a form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, hereditary transmission of a lifestyle which often includes an occupation, ritual status in a hierarchy and customary social interaction and exclusion based on cultural notions of purity and pollution." At present there are almost 250 million untouchables. Although the government has debarred the caste bigotry since 1950, but chauvinism continues. Postcolonial India has concerted to accomplish only political sovereignty and not the social one; though the later certainly needs to be summoned in a vigorous way. Untouchability is still being practiced in Indian society and some proper implementation of laws to curb this social discrimination is an urgent need.

### Material of study

Arundhati Roy is an Indian novelist, activist and a world citizen. She came to limelight when her debut novel "*The God of Small Things*" won her the Booker Prize in 1997. She looks at social problems as closely that touches the writer's sensibility and believes that an authentic writer can't remain detached. Roy

herself has said that her fiction is an inextricable mixture of experience and imagination. Arundhati Roy has brought the astringent legitimacy of untouchability before the world through "*The God of Small Things*". In the democratic India, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, untouchability still exists. This awarded novel portrays the cross caste and sub-caste based social sections existing in the Hindu society. In this novel, Arundhati has illustrated the intense cross caste conflict; this conflict is not taking place between Touchable Hindus and untouchables, it's between Syrian Christians and untouchables. It shows that untouchables are not only suffering torturing and harassment from Hindus but also from other religious communities in this democratic India.

Arundhati Roy has negotiated with the crisis of untouchability beleaguering the Indian society in her booker winner novel, *The God of Small Things*. She is dismayed at the barbarous behavior meted out to the lower section of the society, even in this postcolonial age. In this regard, she says that: "Fifty years after independence, India is still struggling with the legacy of colonialism, still flinching from the cultural insult (and ....) we are still caught up in the business of "disproving" the white world's definition of us" (Roy, 73-74). In this novel, *The God of Small Things*, the laws of India's caste system are conked out by the characters of Ammu and Velutha, an Untouchable or Paravan. Velutha works at the Paradise Pickles and preserves factory owned by Ammu's family. Yet, because he is an Untouchable, the other workers rail against him and he is remunerated less money for his work. Velutha's occurrence is disquieting to many who believe he proceeds above his station. His own father comments this problem: "Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel" (Roy, 73).

#### **Repercussion of untouchability in *The God of small Things***

The inspiration of untouchability is investigated at two levels in the novel. Firstly, we have socially untouchables or Parvan, who are not at all, permitted fundamental human rights. Secondly, we have emblematic untouchables in high castes. Here prejudice articulates itself in marginalizing the women in their personal and public life. In this novel, the rules of

India's caste system are wrecked by the characters of Ammu and Velutha, an Untouchable or Paravan. The whole episode in *The God of Small Things* takes place in the southern Indian state of Kerala, and circles around an outlawed relationship between a Syrian Christian divorcee and mother of two children, Ammu, and a low caste carpenter, Velutha. A divorced woman is not entitled any right to pursue for happiness in life. The only itinerary open to her is to squander a static life, waiting for death. Any effort on her part to see life autonomously intimidates the existing order. She is at loggerheads with the society at large because she married outside her community and a divorcee to. Ammu's expedition for emotional support ends in Velutha, a low caste or 'untouchable' carpenter; whose family has been serving in Ammu's house since a long time.

The author's inherent suggestion here is that Indian women can endure suffering, even torture, but rebuff to surrender to immorality against their wishes. This is seen here:

Ammu watches her husband's mouth more as it formed words. She said nothing. He grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence. Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from the efforts. Ammu took down the heaviest book she could find in the bookshelf.... *The Reader's Digest World Atlas*....and hits him with it as hard as she could. On his head, on his eyes, his back, and shoulders. When he regained consciousness, he was puzzled by his bruises. He apologized abjectly for the violence, but immediately began to badger her about helping with his transfer. This fell into a pattern. Drunken violence followed by post drunken badgering (Roy, 42)

*The God of Small Things* crafts an assail on the patriarchal philosophy of Kerala's touchable society; the high caste Syrian Christians and the high caste Hindus. The problem of patriarchal supremacy and female subalternity are rooted in the geo-cultural veracity of Ayemenem. Velutha and Vellya, his father went through the most brutal treatment one can envisage a human being receiving at the hands of another human being. In Mammachi's days the untouchables were not permitted to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths, when they

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spoke to distract their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed.

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The novel is stuffed with illustrations of caste politics. The dizygotic twins are let known by their grandmother Mammachi that Paravans are anticipated "to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away the footprints so that Brahmins or Syrians Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprints"4 (Roy, 73- 74). This amply reveals how a sensation of abhorrence and dominance is installed in children who are rather naive to comprehend all these racial myths.

The discrimination is perpetrated by a group of the characters who are themselves the sufferers of injustice. Mammachi, Ammu's mother, who tolerated her husband's obnoxious attitude, overlooks Chacko's sexual exploitation of the female workers, but she can't bear her daughter's love affair with a Parvan. Baby Kochamma, the guardian of the system, would go to any limit to hoard the so-called family honour. The novel demonstrates the course of creating and cataloging Paravans within the high class families -- the people who go ahead of the unwritten laws of society in pursuit of happiness. Even though Velutha is a highly talented person with proven expertise of carpentry, yet he what he gets in life is the social exclusion. He fails to realize why his father Vellya Paapen scolds him for his love-affair with Ammu, a high status woman; and is against this social discrimination. Consequently, his audacity in carrying on this constrained love-affair proves a deadly peril for him. On hearing about this love-affair, Babby Kochamma connives with the Inspector and Velutha is put behind the prison by Inspector Matthew, where he is severely beaten to death. Velutha was viciously tormented in the police station:

He (Velutha) was semi-conscious, but was not moving. His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheek bones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth, three of which were embedded in his lower lip, hideously inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his ribs were splintered; one had pierced his left lung which was what made him bleed from his mouth. The blood on his breathes bright red, fresh and fresh and frothy. His lower intestine was ruptured and haemorrhaged, the blood

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collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places; the concussion had paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and return. Both his knee caps were shattered (Roy, 310).

Velutha, falls a victim to the police cruelty and dies in the night. Roy describes his death, "The God of Loss. The God of Small Things. He left no foot prints in sand, no ripples in water, No image in mirrors" (Roy, 265). Velutha's dead body was discarded in a pauper's pit where the police dump their dead. Ammu realizes that she has been responsible for the death of her lover Velutha-an untouchable low-caste paravan. Ammu dies helplessly, sick and alone in the lodge. The church declines to bury on several counts. Chacko takes her to crematorium where nobody except beggars, derelicts and the police-custody dead were cremated. It is a warning to the transgressors of the laws laid down by traditional, caste-ridden conservative and oppressive patriarchal society. Both of them suffer tragically for ignoring the love laws and die at its altar. After the death of Ammu, Rachel and Estha's struggle for existence in the society has become miserable. They were unsure of their identity. The characters in *The God of Small Things* have a large universal appeal. They presents struggle between the community and individual on the timeless cause. Roy attacks the society ridden with untouchability, orthodoxy and outworn taboos that frustrate us. She throws light on the exploitation of the labour, oppressed people and their pitiable, social and economic conditions. The novel ends with a 'tomorrow'. It signals that there is no end for the emotions and the passions of the human heart were the dead are not really dead.

**Conclusion**

We can conclude that in *The Good of Small Things*, Roy presents an altercation between the big man and the small man as compared with the Laltain and Mombatti. Both 'Laltain' and 'Mombati' give us light but the former is well fed and well protected and can bravely face the blowing winds while 'Mombati' has no glass, no protection and no support and it can easily be blown out by a surge of wind. Untouchables severely suffer the impact of casteism, nepotism, social injustice and callous police administration. This novel shows maladjustment between the God of Big things in terms of Pappachi, Kochamma, Chacko and Comrad Pillai and The God of small things in the terms of Ammu,

Veplutha and Estha. Thus we see that untouchability is still being practiced in Indian society. Arundhati Roy needs to be congratulated for exposing this foul play of postcolonial India to the entire world.

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